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ABSTRACT

The new pluralism in a democratic society requires that cultural differences be regarded as differences rather than deficits; however, this view of cultural pluralism does not mean that the notion of cultural differences should be carried to such an extreme as to become separatist in orientation. Cultural differences represent various societies' unique ways of coping in particular contexts, and it is not appropriate to judge the way others live by the standards of one's own culture. On the other hand, one should not conclude that particular beliefs and behavior patterns that work well in one cultural setting will necessarily be effective in another setting. Tenacious adherence to one's traditional cultural practices in a radically different context is maladaptive and self defeating. Thus, immigrants to America should be helped to understand that pride in their cultural heritage does not entail preserving all their cultural practices at all costs, and that living in a democracy does not justify, in the name of cultural pluralism, adherence to cultural norms that infringe on the rights of others. In a culturally diverse society, individuals can cope best by reconciling two or more cultural systems through modification of both. (MJL)

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When Is A Difference Not A Difference?

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WHEN IS A DIFFERENCE NOT A DIFFERENCE?*

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When Horace N. Kallen introduced the concept of cultural pluralism in 1915 he described the American way as the way of orchestration.

> As in an orchestra, the different instruments, each with its own characteristic timber and theme, contribute distinct and recognizable parts of the composition, so in the life and culture of a nation, the different regional, ethnic, occupational, religious, and other communities compound their different activities to make up the national spirit.[1]

Thus the American way was to be sustained by equality of different ethnic groups and the interactions between the "different but equal" without any single group dominating the rest. He insisted that ethnic groups should develop a positive self-image and a pride in their respective group's cultural heritage and communal values, but still function as partially integrated political and economic entities within the boundaries of a common national aspiration and spirit.

However, since the mid-1960's there has been a resurgence of cultural pluralism with a different thrust. As Harry S. Broudy points out, the "new pluralism" came out of the attempts to translate the Civil Rights and Great Society legislations into educational and economic programs.[2] While the new pluralists, as did Kallen, held that the different in our society will be unified into a cohesive democratic nation, their arguments were heavily scewed in favor of demanding that minority cultures as different but equal groups be allowed to participate in the various activities of the country on their own terms. Further, the social institutions, particularly our schools, were asked to "take into account the linguistic and other cultural differences that children of minority groups bring to the classroom, and that the schools refrain from imposing the majority culture both in its language and ethos on these children."[3]

The New Pluralism

Advocates of the new pluralism insisted that participatory democracy is fundamentally pluralistic and that it entailed the acceptance of the intrinsic worth of all human beings and their unique individuality. This meant that cultural differences between persons should be viewed as differences but not as deficits.

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Stephen S. and Joan C. Baratz echoed the same sentiment when they noted that many social science research with minority groups "have been postulated on an idealized norm of 'American behavior' against which all behavior is measured. This norm is defined operationally in terms of the way white-middle-class American is supposed to behave."[4] They go on to point out that acceptance of such a norm in place of legitimate values of minority group leads to the belief that to be different from white is to be inferior. And thus, "differences in behavior are interpreted as genetic pathology or as the alleged pathology of the environment."[5] The deficit view, it is argued, denigrates the worth and dignity of the individual by unjustly and erroneously judging human potentialities and the different ways in which people of other cultures think, learn, communicate, and act.

The notion that "a difference is not a deficit" has been useful in exposing ethnocentric assumptions underlying various social and educational programs in our society. But it is not without difficulty, for the supporters of this view have not always clearly indicated how far the notion should be carried. For example, are we, as members of this society, willing to grant that practices of all cultural groups are different but equally valid and therefore we should render no judgments about them? Are we then also willing to admit that the racist practices of the KKK are nothing more than different cultural practices than our own? Here Broudy is right in pointing out that

> Social organization necessitates varying degree of interdependence, whereas cultural diversity that claims complete autonomy for each cultural group can only result in aggregate of groups with a minimum dependence on each other. Taken seriously and interpreted strictly it leads to cultural separatism or atomism.[6]

He goes on to say that the advocates of cultural pluralism do not agree on how far toward such separatism they wish to go. Even James Banks, who has written widely in support of cultural pluralism and multicultural education, warns us that "if carried to its logical extreme, the cultural pluralism argument can be used to justify racism, cultural genocide, and other cultural practices which are antithetical to a democratic society."[7]

While it is not clear what Banks means by "the cultural pluralism argument," it is clear that a conclusion in support of building a cohesive democratic society cannot follow from an argument that (1) all cultures are equally valid in their own context, (2) there can be no neutral or objective standards to judge other cultures and (3) therefore all cultural groups should be permitted to practice their own ways regardless of the consequences to the larger society.

This, of course, is not the kind of reasoning the supporters of cultural pluralism are advocating. Yet, in terms of my personal experiences, I am persuaded that many teacher educators view cultural pluralism and multicultural education as representing such an extreme cultural relativist view which would allow anything and everything. It is not unusual to find that multicultural education is misunderstood by many to be concerned exclusively with minority problems and/or ethnic studies. It is important for us to keep in mind that the fact that although different cultures have different values that fact does not necessarily imply that values ought to be relative or that there cannot be some objective way of justifying value judgments. As Pratte cautions us

> While it is true that the same action or thing is judged differently in different cultures, it is a major and unwarranted jump from the description of existing relativism to the claim that no objectively valid rational way of justifying basic ethical or value judgments exists.[8]

In point of fact, those of us who value cultural diversity and support cultural pluralism do not view religious bigotry and racial discrimination as practiced by certain groups in America as a matter of cultural differnce, rather we judge them to be unethical and undemocratic.

It is also important to remind ourselves that a statement such as " a difference is not a deficit" is a slogan. As such its primary function is to emphasize or to help others become aware of certain ignored or neglected aspects of our thoughts and action. Hence, a slogan tells us how we ought (or ought not) to think about something. That is, we ought not to think about cultural differences as deficits. A slogan calls our attention to a particular aspect of a broader and more comprehensive point of view. However, a slogan simply does not give us a systematic and logical justification for a point of view nor does it spell out the practical implications of that position. For example, the slogan "we teach the child not the subject matter" "tells" us that whatever is taught we should always take into account the needs and interests of the learner. How absurd it would be to view this slogan as expressing an entire philosophy of education which holds that we need not be concerned about what is taught as long as the learners are taught? Similarly, "a difference is not a deficit" points out only one aspect of cultural pluralism. Consequently, frequent use of "unity in diversity" or "a difference is not a deficit" may not only fail to provide persuasive arguments for cultural pluralism but may even contribute to misconceptions about the ideal we wish to promote.

Technically, cultural pluralism, as it has been used in recent years, is not a philosophy in that it is not a set of beliefs and assumptions about the nature of reality, knowledge and values which are connected together with logical justifications for the conclusions contained therein. Rather, it is an ideology for it is a description of an ideal state which is believed to be desirable. Thus, cultural pluralism as an ideology contains some beliefs about the nature of reality, knowledge and values but it also provides explanations about why the ideal state has not been achieved and the best ways in which such a state can be realized. Because an ideology is more of a program of action than a logical system of ideas, it not only fails to state the fundamental assumptions upon which the ideology is found but the existence of such assumptions are not even recognized. It is probably for this reason the advocates of cultural pluralism point out the value of cultural diversity without a careful analysis of the consequences of extending cultural relativism to its logical conslusion. Again, it is probably for this reason why there is a dearth of careful analyses of the criteria with which important and relevant cultural characteristics may be distinguished from unimportant and even undesirable practices. I am convinced that if we are to persuade others to recognize the validity of cultural pluralism, we need to do a more careful and systematic analysis of the key concepts, principles, assumptions and even slogans related to the pluralistic ideology.

What I wish to do this morning is to discuss (1) that the ways in which minority cultures in America differ from the dominanat norms of thinking, learning, communicating and acting ought not to be seen as deficits, (2) at some point or in some context these differences cease to be mere differences and (3) some implications of my position. In a sense this is a response to those who hold that there is only one idealized norm to which all must conform and to those who insist that since cultural norms are valid for only those who hold them, they should be permitted to practice their own ways at all times and regardless of their consequences.

Cultural Differences Are Not Deficits

According to Clifford Geertz

> Culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns- customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters, as has, by and large, been the case up to now, but as a set of control mechanisms- plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call "programs")- for governing of behavior.[9]

Hence, the culture of a society consists of the standards and control mechanisms with which its members assign meaning, values and significance to things, events and behaviors. These standards and controls have been established because they enable the members of that society to deal with the needs and problems which arise out of their environment and associations with others. Cultures then can be seen as different ways of dealing with essentially similar problems and needs. They represent various societies' successful experiments in living which have been built up over time. Human beings become individuals "under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in terms of which we give form, order, point, and direction to our lives."[10] The culture to which one belongs, then, becomes the root of the individual's identity. Hence, to reject or demean a person's cultural heritage is to do psychological and moral violence to the dignity and worth of that individual.

If we conclude that cultures are various societies' successful experiments in living, then we can argue that the patterns of beliefs and behaviors found in various societies have no intrinsic meanings apart from their cultural context, for such patterns are reflections of unique world views and value orientations belonging to individual societies. In this sense, as Ruth Benedict and Melville Herskovits once pointed out,[11] cultures are equally valid patterns of life and every set of cultural norms is valid only for the people who have them. Hence, it would be unreasonable to argue that any one set of cultural practices is universally good for all societies or is inherently superior to all other cultures. It would appear that there could not be neutral or objective criteria by which cultures may be compared and judged. It is for this reason some point out that comparing cultures is tantamount to comparing apples and oranges.

As was suggested earlier, we become individuals through our culture. And because our culture is so much a part of what we are and what we do that we often view it as if it were innate, or that it is an absolute by which all individuals must guide their life. Thus ethnocentrism leads us to judge others in terms of our own cultural norms, which makes it difficult for us to see that other cultures are also effective means of dealing with the needs and problems of the respective societies. This attitude, of course, inclines us to conclude that those who do not conform to our norms must be stupid, depraved, irresponsible, psychopathic, inferior or sinful to a point beyond all redemption. The fact that Asian and Pacific Americans are often seen as "Asians in America" or that we are non-assertive and reserved therefore unsuitable for executive or administrative posts are only some examples of the deficit view which defines American in terms of being white and competence in terms of the stereotypic Anglo-American traits.

It is this implicit but pervasive deficit view in the American culture which forces many minority children to be ashamed of their ethnicity and cultural heritage. At best, ethnocentrism and the deficit view rob our society of richness.

Cultural diversity is enriching in at least two ways. One is that human life becomes much more interesting, stimulating and even exciting when there are many varied ways of thinking, feeling, expressing, acting and viewing the world. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, given the range in kinds and complexity of human needs and wants, the more alternative problem solving approaches there are the more we are likely to find solutions which may enable us to live our lives in an increasingly effective way. Cultural differences as alternative ways of dealing with essentially similar problems present us with a wide variety of options from which we can learn and grow. Thomas Green concurs in saying that no man's way of life is so rich that it may not be further enriched by contact with other points of view.

> The conviction is that diversity is enriching because no man has a monopoly on the truth about the good life. There are many ways. Diversity is further valued because it provides any society with a richer pool of leadership from which to draw in times of crisis.[11]

The different styles of thinking, learning, communicating and acting which various cultural groups in America have ought not to be considered as deficits to be eliminated, for they are the elements which enrich the life patterns of our society. On the basis of what has been said, the deficit model of viewing minority cultures is unfair to the groups and individuals for it not only leads to erroneous judgments about human potentialities and their realizations but it impedes the development of a just cultural democracy. What is tacitly implied in all this is the view that the worth of one's culture is not based solely on the fact that it is his/hers,but that one's cultural patterns (norms) have enabled him/her to achieve his/her purposes. The very existence (or persistence) of certain cultural patterns suggest that they do serve worthwhile functions.

Differences Are Not Mere Differences

On the basis of the foregoing, we may conclude that all cultures do their job. However, from the fact that particular behaviors and belief patterns have been worked out by a given culture as a means of dealing with its problems, we should not conclude that such patterns are necessarily the best possible ways of meeting the human needs in that society. Nor should we even insist that a particular practice which has worked well in one cultural setting will be equally effective in a different cultural setting. For example, the fact that

classroom discipline has been maintained in schools in Korea by using severe corporal punishment does not guarantee that the use of the same measures will enable us to preserve classroom discipline in America. On the contrary, the results may be quite the opposite of the anticipated effect.

Ample evidence exists to suggest that some cultural practices (particularly in highly technological societies), while fulfilling immediate needs, often have long-term consequences which are counter productive. The culture of a society that selects its means of problem solving chiefly in terms of its immediate utility may face many complex and unsuspected outcomes which may be self-defeating to the fundamental goals of that society. I am then suggesting that cultural patterns can be judged in terms of the effectiveness with which they enable the members of that society to deal with their problems. This implies that some cultures may be more effective than others. Similarly, some cultures may be more maladaptive and self-defeating than others and that those cultural practices which tend to be self-defeating need to be modified, abandoned or even prohibited. For example, many Asian immigrants demand unquestioning obedience from their children who have been taught the importance of self-reliance, self-assertiveness and personal involvement by the dominant culture. Persistent practice of this type of child rearing approach based on the Asian cultural norms, more often than not, leads to hostile confrontations between adults and children and destructive intergenerational conflicts. Clearly, this kind of tenacious adherence to one's own cultural practice in a radically different cultural context is self-defeating. We should no longer consider the use of such maladaptive and self-defeating patterns as merely a matter of applying different but equally valid cultural norms.

Much work needs to be done to convince the multitude of recent arrivals to these American shores that having a pride in one's own cultural heritage does not and should not entail the preservations of all of their cultural practices at all cost. Also, the children of the immigrants should be helped to understand that living in America does not necessarily mean that they should divest themselves of all traits of their ethnicity which are the basic fabric of their self identity. Further, minority individuals who want to "make it" in the dominant society must examine and modify their own cultural ways to see how well such patterns will help them achieve their purposes.

As Harry Broudy pointed out earlier, social organization necessitates varying degrees of interdependence. As members of a democratic society (no matter how imperfect it may be) we must be concerned about the consequences of our actions be performed for the purpose of achieving personal objectives.

The merit of our actions should be tested in terms of our personal goals, which in turn should be examined according to the fundamental principles upon which American democracy is founded, i.e., the principle of freedom and equal opportunity, justice and rights for all. In the final analysis, personal or cultural practices which are contradictory to these ideals of participatory democracy will affect everyone's life. If one's own cultural norms sanction exploitation of others, limit their freedom and equality, such practices can no longer be justified in the name of cultural pluralism, because they are self-defeating both at the personal and societal levels. Indeed, the degree to which our actions violate the rights and freedom of others, to that degree our own freedom and rights are diminished. For example, if we fish or hunt or otherwise exploit the natural resources without regard to their consequences on the environmental conditions at large, these actions could not be justified in the name of cultural pluralism just because one's own cultural norms may permit them. It is in this sense that certain practices of various cultural groups may not be viewed as simply cultural differences.

In the context of our discussion, all sorts of cultural norms are permissible in so far as they do not violate the basic tenets of participatory democracy, because

> cultural pluralism is characterized by a commitment to the worth of cultural diversity and factions promoting an agenda of politics, but it goes beyond the promotion of the values of cultural subgroups to the forming of a public as the result of a recognition of a problematic situations having direct and indirect consequences.[12]

Democracy requires not only an emphasis on personal needs and interests and on various points of shared common interest, but also a recognition of mutual interest as a means of social control. In other words, a democratic society should not only encourage free interactions among individuals and groups but also changes in social habits, that is, continuous readjustments through meeting new situations produced by a wide variety of interactions with others. It is essential that the members of a democratic society recognize that the needs of others are as important to those people as their own are to them. This recognition is a necessary prerequisite for effective handling of conflicts among individuals and groups.

Some Implications

In order to live effectively and in an enriching way one not only needs to know about other cultural patterns but also a way of reconciling the diverse patterns so that a new and unique approach to life may emerge. Here we find the concepts of private culture and syncretism to be useful.

Private Culture

As every society has a culture so may we speak of each person as having his/her own private "culture," which may include awareness of several distinct "cultures" of other individuals. These cultural awarenesses within a person's private culture represent the individual's perceptions of how other human beings have organized their experiences based on the standards by which others perceive, predict, judge, and act.[13] It is through our knowledge of the private cultures of our associates that we learn to accomplish those goals that are best achieved through working together. Hence, a person's private culture may include knowledge of several different language patterns, norms of conduct and valuation, and procedures for getting things done. Depending upon the nature of one's purpose and its context, the individual often moves from one set of cultural concepts to another within one's repertoire. For example, if this paper had been written for a sixth-grade audience, I would have used a different "language."

If a person operates rigidly in terms of a single culture (e.g., using standard English in a multi-ethnic community), he/she will be less effective in accomplishing one's purposes. This suggests that the greater one's breadth of cultural awareness and the more flexible a person is in shifting from one appropriate cultural context to another, the more successful that person will be in achieving desired outcomes. Frequent inter-ethnic contact is important for it tends to increase the number of other cultural orientations within the private culture of an individual.

Typically, a person uses only a limited number of cultural orientations in his/her repertoire. If the dominant culture views other cultural patterns as deficits, the number of alternative cultural orientations that an individual could use would be limited to those the mainstream culture regards as legitimate. Minority children, for example, may be pressured, implicitly or explicitly, to reject their own language and use only standard English. Rejection of their language patterns as a low-status form reinforces the negative image minority children have of their own culture and personal identity. One of the problems of the deficit view is that the more one conforms exclusively to the dominant (the "right") norm, the more one crushes self-esteem and pride in one's own identity. Ethnocentrism (the deficit view) not only robs richness from both the dominant and minority cultures but also increases alienation and socio-psychological conflicts.

Syncretism

If the goal of democratic education is to develop each individual's potential and to aid in building a social order that can make life secure and enriching for all, then neither total assimilationism nor separatism is the answer. Notwithstanding the importance of minority cultures to many Americans, the norms of the dominant culture are likely to prevail in many activities of the larger society. It would indeed be unrealistic to suggest that minority groups ignore the dominant culture, but it is equally unreasonable to demand members of minority cultures to divest themselves of their own ethnic distinctiveness. What is needed is the preservation and enrichment of minority cultures as well as reconciliation of these patterns with those of the dominant culture. However, the notion of "preservation and extension" should not be understood as a reactionary, "back-to-the-blanket" move, rather, it should be seen as a syncretic process.

"Syncretism is the reconciliation of both two or more cultural systems or elements, with the modification of both."[14] This conception is not the same as the "melting" of distinctive cultures into one allegedly superior one. Syncretism refers to the development of a new and unique culture (private or societal) and a new personal identity by interweaving different cultural elements together. For example, an Asian-American youth may discard the unquestioning obedience to elders and become more self-assertive, but may retain that part of Asian culture that encourages one to be less egocentric and think in terms of relationships to others. This person is neither an Asian in America nor an imitation of the white American, but has emerged as a new Asian-American. Similarly, an Anglo-American may learn to temper his/her individualism and begin to be more concerned about the ways in which individuals need to be mutually dependent on each other.

Concluding Comments

Conflicts in interest and values are bound to arise in a society like America that has many diverse cultural elements. Hence, we are constantly in a position of having to interact with individuals who do not share our own system of norms and beliefs. Thus we can no longer depend on our own cultural ways to gain reliable reading of what others are going to do next or how we can deal effectively with our own life problems. Over and beyond the work we are doing to help make monocultural institutions in America become multicultural, we need to educate the members of our own ethnic communities to understand that their life is inextricably related to the ways in which other people think, value and act.

In a culturally diverse society, all of its members may need to modify some of their ways by going beyond their own culture. To do this we need to understand the dominant as well as other minority cultures in terms of their points of agreements, disagreements and even conflicts with our own norms so that there may emerge new and unique cultural patterns consonant with the fundamental ideals of participatory democracy. But we cannot normally go beyond our own culture without "first exposing its major hidden axioms, and unstated assumptions concerning what life is all about - how it is lived, viewed and analyzed, talked about, described and changed."[15] Only by doing this kind of analysis of our own cultures, the members of our ethnic communities may begin to understand the reasons and causes of the difficulties they may encounter in the larger society and with their children. And who but all of you in this room could be better qualified to do this work?

FOOTNOTES

[1]Horace N. Kallen, The Education of Free Men (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1949), p. 117.

[2]Harry S. Broudy, "Cultural Pluralism: New Wine in Old Bottles," Innovations in Education, John Martin Rich, ed., Third Edition (Boston,: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1981), p. 232.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Stephen S. and Joan C. Baratz, "Early Childhood Intervention: The Social Science Base of Institutional Racism," Harvard Educational Review, Vol. Forty, No. 1, February 1970, pp. 31-32

[5]Ibid.

[6]Broudy, op. cit., p. 232.

[7]James Banks, "Cultural Pluralism and the Schools," Innovations in Education , p. 229.

[8]Richard Pratte, Pluralism in Education, (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1979), p. 147.

[9]Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, Inc., N.Y., 1973), p. 44.

[10]Ruth Benedict, Patterns of Culture (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), p. 278 and Melville J. Herskovits, Cultural Relativism (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 31, 33.

[11]Thomas Green, Education and Pluralism: Ideal and Reality: (Twenty Sixth Annual J. Richard Street Lecture, Syracuse University, School of Education, 1966), p. 10.

[12]Pratte, op. cit., p. 151.

[13]Ward Hunt Goodenough, Cooperation in Change (New York: Russell Sage Foundations, 1963).

[14]Henry Burger, "Syncretism, An Acculturative Accelerator," Human Organization, XXV (Summer, 1966), p. 103.

[15]Edward T. Hall, Beyond Culture (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976), p. 195.